

Compassion through intercorporeality: the value of the phenomenological philosophy of David Michael Levin to social work education

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**Compassion through Intercorporeality:
The Value of the Phenomenological Philosophy
of David Michael Levin to Social Work Education**

Abstract

Compassion is an important working concept in social work and yet it is under-researched and under-theorised. This article rigorously addresses that theoretical deficit by drawing on philosophical phenomenology to present an embodied, intercorporeal conceptualisation of compassion for application in social work education and practice. It identifies the limited points of connection, to date, between phenomenology and social work and seeks to significantly improve this situation through a focus on the work of David Michael Levin, an interpreter of the phenomenological tradition and in particular the works of Marcel Merleau-Ponty. The term “intercorporeality” is taken from Levin and is introduced as an entirely original way of theorising how compassion can be embodied in social work. The article focuses on motility or the movement of the body in communication and on hearing compassionately. Levin is also presented as a phenomenologist unafraid to engage with both the political and spiritual domains. His value for social work is presented and critiqued and the potential of his conceptualisation of compassion for future social work practice is emphasised.

Key Words: Compassion, Intercorporeality, Levin, Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, Spirituality, Embodiment, Motility, Listening,

Social Work and Compassion

The concept of compassion holds a prominent yet precarious position in social work. Both characteristics are well illustrated by an examination of the development of the United Kingdom government’s Knowledge and Skills Statement (known as the KSS) for Children and Family Social Workers (2014). Its draft version (July 2014) stated that social workers must:

"be able to hold a compassionate position about difficult social circumstances providing help and support;...

Build purposeful, effective relationships with children and families, which are both authoritative and compassionate." (Department of Education, 2014a)

These quotations seem to provide positive indications in regard to the prominence of the concept. However, in November 2014, the final version of the KSS for Children and Family Social Workers was released (Department of Education, 2014b). This was the statement which all children and families social workers in the UK were expected to address and follow. In this final version much of the original text was retained but both references to compassion were expunged as was the entire

section on ethics and values. One can only interpret this to mean that compassion or as it was so eloquently described “the ability to hold a compassionate position” –is not, according to the UK government, a key social work skill or any part of social work studies in work with children and families. The sense of a delicate balance of compassion alongside authority had also been removed; leaving behind only a more isolated and unbalanced reliance on the authority element in the social work role. Indeed, Higgins (2016) characterises the KSS as an authoritarian statement.

A review of the recent literature on compassion in social work and related health care professions shows that it is a concept that has some currency but also that it is usually considered in two particular ways, in terms of self-compassion (Gustin and Wagner, 2013; Germer and Neff, 2013; Raab, 2014) often associated with mindfulness (Kabat- Zinn, 2013) and also in terms of the absence or ebbing away of compassion, usually known as compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002; Kapoulitsas and Corcoran, 2015). The key point made by the advocates of self-compassion is that in order to be compassionate towards others one must show compassion and possibly forgiveness to oneself. The claim is made that in this way through the “butterfly effect of caring” (Gustin and Wagner, 2013) self-compassion can then be transformed back into compassion for others. In 2015 Kapoulitsas and Corcoran published research on compassion fatigue amongst social workers in Australia. They found that such fatigue was a key indicator in “burn out”, and one of the reasons why social workers left the profession comparatively early. They suggested a series of measures to alleviate this fatigue such as improved supervision and reduced case-loads, none of which involved giving up on the concept of compassion in social work. What is clear from the review of the literature, however, is that there have been few recent discussions on the fundamental nature of compassion itself. Exceptionally, Raab (2014, p.97) does discuss the derivation of the word compassion, noting that it is taken from the latin words ‘com’ and ‘pati’ which taken together mean “to suffer with”. This last word, with, and its implication that compassion is something done not alone but together with others is discussed at length below. Currently, however, the social work discipline lacks the language to comprehend and explain what exactly is taking place when social workers are compassionate. It does not know how to express what it means by holding “a compassionate position”.

This article uses a particular phenomenological philosophy to provide such a language, to describe what holding such a position looks like and what it sounds like – in other words, how compassion can be embodied in social work. It will also show how an embodied compassion, fully explicated, can be the key to linking spiritual and political approaches to social work. In all this it aims to make the concept of compassion more solidly established and less precarious. As the intention is to progress through the use of phenomenological thought, the article begins, however, by broadly situating the philosophy of phenomenology in relation to the discipline of social work.

The Limited Engagement of Social Work with Phenomenology

In 2006 Webb provided a definition of phenomenology for social work as:

“A mainstream perspective in philosophy that emphasises the importance of lived experience. This lived character, as a constituting process, consists not simply in what is felt or undergone by people across the passage of time but also of how these passing moments are meaningfully accentuated and preserved.” (Webb, 2006, p.17)

But he added:

“To date there has been no comprehensive modelling applying phenomenology to social work” (ibid, p.17)

This remains the case today with phenomenology continuing to be a discipline which social work academics acknowledge or make occasional nods towards but with which they rarely engage deeply. One writer of some of the foundational texts of the discipline who has proved of most interest to social work academics is Marcel Merleau-Ponty and in particular his ideas on embodiment. For example, Ferguson in his important text on *Child Protection Practice* (2011, p.46) references Merleau-Ponty’s “Phenomenology of Perception”(1962) in making a point about social workers not being attuned to the signals which their own bodies are giving them, but Ferguson does not go further in terms of an explicitly phenomenological approach. A rare example of a deeper engagement with phenomenology in social work is provided by McCormick (2010) where she uses Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on “the lived body” in her research on work with older women and their understanding of food. Apart from this there is next to nothing in the UK in particular however on the use of such ideas or of phenomenology in any guise in the journals of social work with one other exception being Sen et al (2016) and their discussion of the spaces of social work learning – specifically libraries. These writers do not step outside the library to consider phenomenology in social work practice however.

One possible explanation for this absence is that Merleau-Ponty, who wrote originally in French, is not the most accessible of writers. His thought can at times appear intangible or obtuse. Although it has been translated into English, it sometimes reads as if it still needs an interpreter. Ann-Marie Walsh, in her ground-breaking article on “The Resonant Body” (2009) also quotes Merleau-Ponty on embodiment but in addition she draws on the ideas of an interpreter of Merleau-Ponty, the American philosopher David Michael Levin¹. Walsh is the only writer to date to have cited Levin in a social work context but in fact, as shall be shown, his work is rich with significance

¹ He is now known as David Michael Kleinberg-Levin but all texts referenced here have been published under then name Levin.

and implications for social work beyond those already indicated by Walsh and are of particular importance in consideration of the concept of compassion.

Introducing David Michael Levin

In the mid to late 1980s Levin published a trilogy (Levin 1985, 1988, 1989) in which he explored the human condition under conditions of modernity and post-modernity, drawing on a wide range of ideas and texts but in particular the phenomenology of Marcel Merleau-Ponty and the ontology of Martin Heidegger. In the first volume he offered his own vision of phenomenology:

“We need a phenomenology which is capable of working with the body of understandings, that is implicitly operative in our sensibility of our own feelings, our perceptions, our gestural comportments.” (Levin, 1985, p.16)

This quotation provides many typical characteristics of Levin’s approach. It is pluralistic (understandings), it does not downplay the importance of emotion in thinking (feelings) and the particular phrase “gestural comportments” is incredibly important in understanding Levin’s views on how phenomenology can be applied to the everyday and also to professional life and will be discussed further in due course.

At the beginning of the final volume of the trilogy Levin summed up the ground he had covered:

“Each volume addresses the question of self-development by concentrating on an experiential dimension of our embodiment –a distinctive channelling of the human potential...The first volume explores this potential and attempts to provoke greater self-awareness, inherent in our experience with gesture and motility,... the second reflects on this potential in our capacity for vision... [The third] takes up our potential for listening, and likewise attempts to encourage greater self-awareness...” (Levin, 1989, p.4)

This body of work, in which a philosopher carries out an extended discussion on the meaning of embodiment and self-development, is clearly of potential value to social work, particularly as in more recent years the notion of embodiment has been considered to be an increasingly pertinent one in the profession (Cameron and McDermott 2007, Ferguson 2011). No-one, however, has yet connected embodiment with compassion in social work. This is important because it offers the potential for a fuller and deeper understanding of compassion.

The Importance of Openness

In the trilogy and in particular in the first text of the three (1985) Levin offers a number of different definitions of compassion but one of the most important is as follows:

“Compassion –our openness to all beings.” (Levin, 1985, p.316)

This linking of compassion with openness - and in parallel associating a lack of compassion with a closed sensibility indicates Levin's view on human potential and human failings. He describes such closedness as ego-centric and ego-logical, bound by masculinity, patriarchy and technology and as the dominant characteristics of the lives of most contemporary individuals and societies (Levin, 1989, p.12). He then offers an alternative understanding of the self as relational, pre and then post ego-centric, ancestral and primordial. Levin rejects much of Freudian psychoanalysis mainly for its bleakness and what he sees as negativity. He accepts much of the theory of so called "drive psychology" but he does not accept its inevitable permanence. He describes the ego-logical state as the second stage of human development and sees it certainly as something to be transcended. Conventional maturation is regarded as a process by which this second ego-logical or ego centric stage adds layers of self-consciousness leading to a conventionality and social cautiousness such that people lose their first primordial, ancestral sense of Being and interconnectedness. What he hopes for in a third stage of development is a restoration or, as in the title of the first text in the trilogy - *The Recollection of Being* (1985). He wants both individuals and societies to transcend Egohood and reach a third stage; maturity. He then further proposes a fourth stage – a so called hearkening (listening to the spirit within) or a level of spiritual maturity for those who can reach such heights (Levin, 1989,), and this is discussed further below.

Interpreter of Merleau-Ponty

To some extent Levin can be seen as a disciple of Merleau-Ponty and his purpose is in part to explicate Merleau-Ponty's work and make it relevant and accessible to a later generation. Merleau-Ponty's most well-known book is *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) but in fact the texts which Levin uses more extensively in the trilogy, particularly in relation to the idea of compassion, are two later essays "The Child's Relation to Others" (1964) and "The Chiasm - The Intertwining" (1968). Merleau-Ponty is presented in Levin as a challenger and confronter of Cartesian dualism. The 17th Century philosopher Descartes' most quoted idea "Cogito Ergo Sum" (Descartes, 1637) suggests that the thinking self was somehow other or separate from the body. "I think therefore I am" makes the body entirely superfluous to the self and any personal identity. Descartes' dualism had a long-lasting predecessor in Augustinian Christian dualism which saw the flesh as sinful and it also had a successor in a modernist dualism that allowed no space for the spirit in the advance of the mind through science and technology (Levin, 1989). All told these various dualisms have held sway over Western thought on human identity for generations and such thinking is now very deep rooted in much of human experience. Merleau-Ponty completely undermines these dualistic ideas with his sense of self and identity completely fulfilled in the body.

This is best summed up in the quotation: “I do not have a body... I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.141).

In addition to mind/body dualism, Merleau-Ponty also targets others; in particular object/subject dualism and self /other dualism. These dualisms, also found in Descartes, emphasise the isolation of the individual so that a person is only them self alone. Humanism in general and humanists in social work might try to resist such isolationism by suggesting that social workers seek to recognise something of themselves in the person they are working with as a way to foster a sense of mutuality (Whiting, 2015). But Merleau-Ponty and later Levin are both seeking something deeper - a communal sense of Being between beings. Merleau-Ponty writes:

“I live in the facial expression of the other, as I feel him living in mine.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.146)

He does not just say that a person can recognise themselves in another person’s facial expression – he says “they live” in that facial expression. This is the essential meaning of the word “Intercorporeality”. It comes originally from Merleau-Ponty (1970) but it is Levin who emphasises it and frames it in strong contrast to Descartes’ definition of the self. Merleau- Ponty writes “I am my body” but for Levin a person’s sense of identity comes not just from their body but from their body in interaction with other bodies. Therefore he writes:

“I am, first of all, intercorporeality” (Levin, 1988, p.266).

It is this usage of the term intercorporeality intrinsic to personal identity that manages to concentrate resistance to the dualisms of mind and body, spirit and body and of the self and others. In choosing to emphasise this point of relatedness Levin also avoids the sterile debates within humanism about whether people are innately good or not. Goodness is worked out between people and such activity links directly to another of Levin’s definitions of compassion:

“Compassion, or solicitude, essentially involves an awareness of universality and wholeness: we are not alone; and we are not whole, without caring for others.” (Levin, 1985, p.97)

The link back to the earlier discussion on the Latin derivation of the word compassion as “to suffer WITH” is clear here.

Intercorporeality and Recent Social Work Theory and Practice

In order to appreciate what Levin's concept of intercorporeality can offer social work theory and practice it is helpful to consider another comparatively recent social work text which dwells on the relationship between mind and body in social work theory and which also shows how the various dualisms which Levin is resisting remain deeply embedded in theoretical discourse. Lefevre (2010, p.61) with her model for good social work in communication with young people presents a Venn diagram showing the concepts of Being, Knowing and Doing coming together in social work practice. The central segment in the diagram is where, according to Lefevre, effective communication takes place. In other words, a social worker's application of theory, their existential sense of themselves and their skills to do the job – should all combine. However, Lefevre's model could still be criticised from a phenomenological perspective as being Cartesian even though it does seek to integrate thinking, doing and being. This is because knowledge, in the outer part of the knowing circle, is shown to potentially exist somehow separate from its own embodiment. Levin has a section in *The Body's Recollection of Being* (1985, pp148-153) in which he discusses "the thinking hand", in other words he rejects entirely the notion that knowing or identity is in any sense separate from the body. Similarly doing (or activity) is conceived in the outer circle of Lefevre's diagram as potentially separate from an existential sense of self whereas for Levin who you are entirely might be embodied in a gesture of the hand. It is not that as in Lefevre (2010) knowing, being and doing can be cultivated so that they are brought together but that, according to Levin's phenomenological world view, they are always interwoven with each other in all cases. Lefevre's diagram could also be criticised as Cartesian in the sense that it presents or implies an individualistic and inward-looking sense of self. The literature on self-compassion discussed above might be criticised in the same way in that it is not explicitly relational although, to be fair to Lefevre, elsewhere her text does emphasise the importance of relationality in social work development (Lefevre, 2010,).

There are other social work writers whose work more closely aligns to the notion of intercorporeality. For example, Ruch (2002) offered an alternative to the thinking, doing, being triangle in considerations of the importance of reflection and the sense of self in practice with what she calls her messy spiral. She called for the:

“the dissolution of the triangles of education–research–practice and thinking–feeling–doing as each relates to and inter-acts with the other in a reflective, on-going way...So let’s talk to ourselves, amongst ourselves and about ourselves” (Ruch, 2002, p.213).

Levin would very much concur with this sentiment but would add that such integration and inclusiveness need not necessarily rely on verbal communication. A sense of self that is fluid and porous can also be embodied.

Recently, Ferguson (2018) has urged incorporating learning from experiences of and in the body more fully into reflective practice. He has argued for a better understanding of the “defended self” in social work and indeed of the limits of reflective practice. He does go on to argue for an embodied comprehension of the social work interaction:

“Understanding derives not only from what is going on in the mind but what is occurring in the body and through movement as well as stillness...This was evident in the research, for instance, when conversations with parents were difficult and workers moved, sometimes suddenly jumping to their feet and looking around family homes...” (Ferguson, 2018, p419)

Ferguson here is framing embodied reflective practice largely as learning from one’s own sense of the uncomfortableness of a given situation. It is possible, however, with a focus on compassion and intercorporeality, to learn from the body’s sense of ease or fit or even comfort. With that as an aim it is important to ask what does intercorporeality in social work look like and sound like using Levin’s various reflections on the body and the senses to make connections with others.

Compassion in Motility

As noted earlier social work has started to become familiar with the concept of embodiment. Body language has also long been the subject of discussion in relation to practice (Kadushin and Kadushin, 1997). In addition, Cameron and McDermott (2007) write about the body cognizant social worker, showing an appreciation of the social worker moving within their environment. No

author however has brought together a general theory of humanism with the concept of embodiment but Levin in his discussion of “gestural comportments” does this. He differentiates two kinds of body movement – what he calls motility and gesture although they can intersect. Motility involves whole body movements such as standing, walking, sitting etc. Gestures are usually smaller scale movements, of the hands in particular. Both, however, communicate intention and character and Levin shows through clever use of language what he believes – that the character of a person is expressed in the movement of the body:

“When deep compassion is the motivation, to move and to *be* moved are one and the same. (In its encounter with this openness, the tradition of metaphysical dualism, which regards moving and being moved as opposite absolutes, must concede that it is shattered).” (Levin, 1985, p.98)

When Levin describes conventional adult or Egohood (referred to as the second stage of development) he does not write in the standard language of psychoanalysis as might be expected. Rather all his language is physical and it is not meant to be metaphorical. So an immature person is “unstable, rigid, off balance, awkward, errant, falling, disjointed, tight, careless, indifferent, driven, defensive and closed.”(Levin, 1985, p.114). By contrast a person in maturity (by which he means a person who has recollected their interconnectedness with others or their common being) is “grounded, poised, balanced, graceful, flowing, relaxed, open, dance-like, free, serene, agile, manifesting equanimity, ready to let go, tender, gentle, caring, mindful, lively, firm, fitting” (Levin, 1985, p.114) Obviously the power of these lists is in the contrasts. To repeat the key point, Levin is describing character through physical description. He deliberately does not use an internalized or internalizing language for emotional or spiritual states.

Compassion in Seeing

In relation to seeing and compassion Levin writes:

“Seeing and feeling a gaze of respect tactfully directed her way, the child simultaneously learns the meaning of respect for others and develops, within herself, a sense of identity:...

the gaze learning respect is first of all a gaze moved by the experience of compassion” (Levin, 1988 p.260)

Even though he provides such an eloquent account of the formation of character between a parent and child through them simply looking at each other, the main purpose of the second book in Levin's trilogy *The Opening of Vision* (1988) is actually to downplay the importance of seeing or vision or what, in a subsequent essay, he calls *The Hegemony of Vision* (1993). He claims that in the period of modernity it has been sight which has been the dominant sense, what he calls ocularcentrism, to the detriment of the other senses and also to the detriment of human relations. He sees sight as automatically creating distance between the self and others in that the observer always stands apart. Sight certainly plays a large part in social work practice assessments. If, for example, one takes the Home Conditions Questionnaire used by Social Workers in the United Kingdom for two decades as part of the Assessment Framework (Department of Health. 2000) 10 of the 11 questions refer to what can be seen. There is one question on how the house smells – nothing at all on how it feels more broadly or how it sounds.

Compassion in Listening

On listening and compassion Levin notes:

“When I listen to myself, to my words, to the sound of my voice, I can hear others: I hear others ‘inside’ myself. Living other, dead others, others near and others far. Conversely, when I listen to others, I can hear myself” (Levin, 1989. p.272)

In contrast to the sense of sight, Levin considers the hearing sense as automatically inclusive and engendering of connection. In his section on the quality of listening (Levin, 1989) he draws extensively on the work of Carl Rogers. Rogers' humanism has long been influential in social work and so Levin's comment - “The future of our humanism depends on our listening.” (Levin, 1989, p.62) aligns with Rogers' thought but what Levin adds is a stronger emphasis on listening to the self and a worked through philosophical basis for such humanism - that is “the interconnectedness of all beings”. He argues that the way to recollect our being is through listening to others (Levin,

1989, p.222). There is a simple point here in relation to social work. Social work practitioners often need to be eloquent explainers of policy and decisions so much so that talking rather than listening can become the dominant social work skill. A compassionate social worker working through intercorporeality will be listening more than speaking.

It is also important to appreciate how broad is Levin's meaning when he refers to listening to beings. In writing about listening to the dead he draws out the importance of the primordial and of ancestors for identity. But it should also make the reader aware that the term "being" does not only mean the human or even the animate. A house or a room can also have a sound to which a social worker can attune themselves. Warner (2015) has written about the feelings that can be evoked by an environment, mostly negative feelings like fear and disgust. But as well as the feeling, the sound or resonance of a house, not just of its occupants, can be important in developing a deeper understanding of what it means to *be* in that space day by day. How exactly one writes about the feelings evoked by a house or a space in a formal social work report is another question but Levin would argue that those feelings are a relevant and important part of the overall picture.

The Political and Spiritual Implications of Compassion Through Intercorporeality

Levin is not content to write about self-development in relation to the individual alone. The fact that intercorporeality is relational leads necessarily to a social and then a political element in his thinking which is not found, so explicitly at least, in Merleau-Ponty. Levin's main target politically speaking, in these three books, is narcissism leading on to nihilism. He sees narcissism not only at an individual level but also as a symptom of wider societal failings:

"We have failed, somehow, to go beyond the culture of ego-logical narcissism. Not surprisingly, symptoms of collective depression have begun to constellate: emptiness, deadness, despair, narcotization. The culture of narcissism has led us to nihilism, the negation of Meaningful Being (Levin, 1989, p.14)

One might criticise Levin by saying that his definitions of compassion do not give sufficient consideration to the nature of individual suffering. Here however he is cognizant of the impact of

suffering on the wider society and whilst he is seeking to help individuals to develop themselves he is also focused on the betterment of all societies. He puns on “the body politic” (Levin, 1985, p.248). However, whilst Levin provides a call for a politicisation of phenomenology he takes it no further than that. His work, certainly in the trilogy discussed here, is not fully politicised.

The other way in which Levin adds to or enriches phenomenology is in his willingness to discuss spirituality. As discussed above Levin suggests a fourth stage of development for people and societies, what he calls the hearkening stage and which might be characterised as spiritual maturity (Levin, 1989, p48). A sense of spirituality or the numinous is something else which is not as present as it might have been in Merleau-Ponty and which Levin chooses to emphasise or bring out. A sense of spirituality is certainly important but, as ever, it is a physical rather than an ethereal sense. Whiting (2017) argued that so much writing on spirituality in social work is ethereal and disembodied and that what is lacking is a spiritual sense of the body. Levin offers that. However, his presentation of spirituality could be characterised as gnostic or elitist in that his stages of development separate the most spiritually discerning from the rest almost (Levin, 1989, p.48). But if one is to truly live in the other person through intercorporeality then such individualistic and aspirational spirituality is inappropriate. A broader, more democratic and possibly more forgiving sense of spirituality might fit better with social work. What Levin does not do is bring together a discourse on spirituality and one on politics. It is possible to see how a focus on compassion through intercorporeality might do that – as long as both spirituality and politics are understood broadly enough.

Further Reflections on Applicability and Some Criticisms of Levin

The purpose of this article has been to strengthen the position of the concept of compassion in social work by drawing on the work of David Michael Levin to give social workers a

language to explain and understand how they can take a compassionate position. The next step will be to further connect such language to current practice. There are a number of ways this might be possible. Within social work education and before qualification in particular, a focus on intercorporeality will enable students to work in the centre of Lefevre's Venn diagram, on their sense of themselves in situ, what they know and understand and how they might do the job. For example students learning about interview skills are guided to consider empathy as a guiding concept (Egan, 2010,) but they could also focus on considerations of intercorporeality between an interviewer and an interviewee facilitating a deeper sense of connectedness. The interviewer is looking for an aspect of themselves and hence a connection in the other person. They should be able to hear themselves in the other voice and learn more about themselves and their work through such careful listening. This is also true if they "listen" to how their body is with the other person but it is something above and beyond the simple techniques of mirroring etc. (Kadushin and Kadushin, 1997) used in teaching on body language because it has a philosophical underpinning. Students are focused on their being in the fullest sense rather than on their doing so if they get a sense of ease in the interaction they should be able to work through how that happened and what it means – connecting together doing, thinking and feeling. Further work is clearly necessary to make this theoretical development more useful in practice but there is clear potential.

One way in which Levin as a theoretician is not so helpful in this regard is that in his work he takes himself so seriously. There is noble purpose, high seriousness and some warmth in Levin's books but little or no humour, a gap or absence he shares with Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and other phenomenologists.

In other respects Levin's approach is also open to criticism. His focus on the physical in his account of character may leave him open to being interpreted as allowing people to be judged by appearances with character inappropriately linked to appearance. If there is an argument that who you are can be entirely embodied in a hand gesture then there will inevitably be wide scope for

potential misunderstanding especially across age, race, gender and culture differences more broadly. But the emphasis on hearing rather than sight mitigates this as does Levin's general emphasis on locating the self in the other person. Embodiment has been emphasised for the purpose of understanding compassion and not for any other reason. Lastly, what if the social worker cannot find that point of connection and then a sense of intercorporeality with the other person? Then the social worker must act as if there is a connection even if they cannot see or hear it yet and trust that in time it will emerge. As long as they have this trust, which is in line with Levin's basic humanism, there need not be any sense of inauthenticity. .

Conclusion

The most important quotations taken from David Michael Levin and used in this article are:

"Compassion -our openness to all beings" (Levin, 1985, p.316)

and

"I am, first of all, ... intercorporeality" (Levin, 1988, p.266).

Taken together and considered in relation to each other, these ideas provide a basis for a theoretical underpinning for the concept of compassion which can be used in social work. Without such an underpinning there is a danger that compassion in social work will become little more than a buzzword. By linking together ideas about embodiment and compassion it has given those who wish to continue to advocate for a compassionate position in the profession a new physical language and a stronger foundation for their practice. The simple example taken from interviews with training shows this new language can be brought to bear in social work education. The value of a particular version of phenomenological philosophy for social work has been demonstrated. It has been made clear that the ideas which Levin adapted from Merleau-Ponty clearly have relevance in a social work context. Lastly, Levin's work, as presented above, shows how an understanding of spirituality can be both grounded and embodied. More is still to be done in terms of considerations of applicability in social work education and practice and in bringing together spiritual and political conceptions of compassion through intercorporeality. Nonetheless, this initial consideration of Levin's philosophy has laid a foundation upon which much conceivably might be built.

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